

# HOW TO CARE FOR YOUR LILAC

Lilacs are able to survive cold winters and generally grow better in slightly alkaline soil and in full sun. There are four basic rules for lilac care: provide good soil, good drainage, plenty of sunlight and scheduled pruning.

**Good drainage** is characterized by the soil's ability to retain sufficient moisture to nourish the root system while still being able to drain off excess moisture. Lilacs do not thrive in soggy soil. The roots will rot and cause the leaves to become smaller over a period of a few years; the plant will eventually die.

**Watering**. Lilacs are water-loving plants but do not like to sit in water. Healthy leaves will have a lustrous shine, look pert and not be puckered. In the summer if the leaves lose their shine, borders of leaves brown a little or the leaves look limp, droopy or soft looking, it is a sign that they need to be irrigated. It is always best to irrigate the roots and not the foliage. Spreading a layer of mulch over the soil around the plant will help retain moisture and reduce the need for watering. Keep the mulch away from the trunk of the plant so that air can circulate around the base of the stem. Piling mulch around the trunk of lilacs, trees and other woody plants in "volcano fashion" invites disease and insects.

**Pruning**. Lilacs flower on old wood and, left unpruned, reliably produce more flowers every year. If pruned, the plant responds by producing fast-growing young vegetative growth with no flowers, in an attempt to restore the removed branches; a pruned lilac often produces few or no flowers for one to five or more years before the new growth matures sufficiently to start flowering. If pruning is required, it should be done right after flowering is finished, before next year's flower buds are formed.

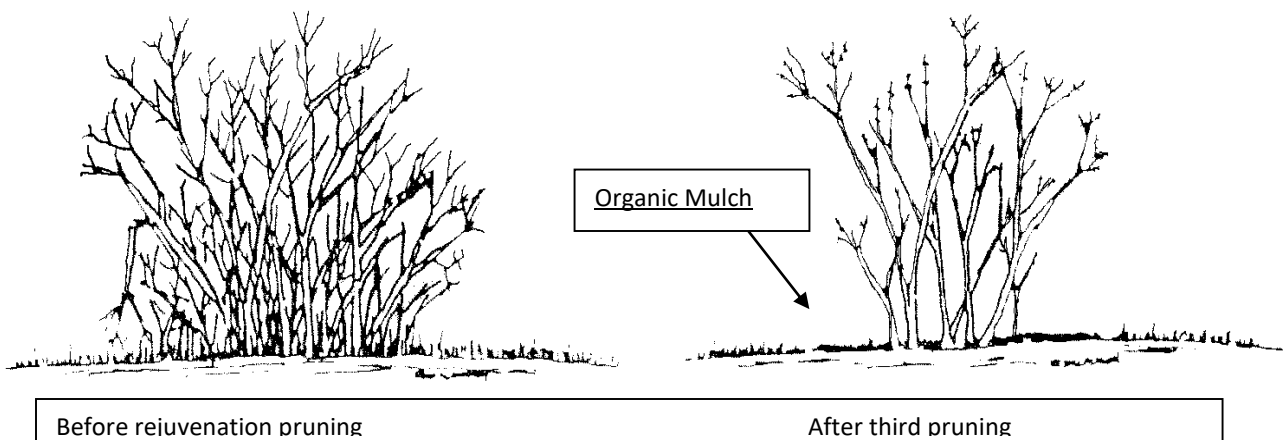
Pruning is an art and a science that is done to control growth and flowering as well as to develop a well-shaped, healthy plant; it is not mandatory every year on main stems. The timing of pruning is important because it affects flowering. Done properly, it can also increase the life of a lilac by years. By cutting off faded blooms just below the flower head immediately after flower period — ideally within a week of when they are spent — you will help the plant concentrate on preparing more flower buds and not seeds. Pruning cuts should be angled  $\frac{1}{4}$ " above a bud. Cut small suckers and shoots at or near ground level. Again, with respect to timing, structural pruning is the only pruning that should be done in the winter when the plant is dormant to remove dead, broken, diseased and crossing branches; this will not harm the plant, but it may result in fewer flowers the following spring. Once your lilacs have reached heights that no longer are pleasing to view or smell flowers one should rejuvenate their plant over a three-year period.

## REJUVENATION

Optimum growth for the common lilac is to have pencil-like shoots with a pair of plump terminal buds. Once lilacs become twenty years old they begin to decline in quality of flower production. To restore a lilac's capacity to produce quality bloom, one must reduce the number of growing points in order to direct ascending nutrients into fewer buds and consequently stronger growth. Rejuvenating old and overgrown plants encourages new growth that will produce a fuller, healthier looking plant is done over a three-year plan. It is best done in the winter when you can see the naked branches and judge the quality of the wood. This will encourage bloom and not push the foliage too hard. The process sacrifices many flower buds, but the ultimate results will be better future flowering.

This plan of scheduled pruning ensures that enough sun and air circulation reach the inner leaves. Done over a three-year period the lilac is able to continue to flower while refreshing its look. In general, leave a hand's width between stems. The first year, cut one-third of the large main stems that are at least 1-1/2 inches in diameter down to ground level. Lilacs are plants that naturally shoot from the base and this is the best way to encourage the plant to grow and allow new shoots to grow again. Choose the oldest, diseased, weak and leggy interior branches to remove first and thin out the small shoots just above soil level. Second year and third year follow the same procedure. The idea is to retain several well-spaced, vigorous stems and remove all others. The three-year plan should result in plants of smaller stature, provided from growth of shoots from the ground.

(If the lilac is a single trunk variety, do not cut the plant to ground level! Instead, remove one-third of the shrub 12-15" above the main break of branches. Branches that come from higher in the trunk are



generally weaker even if they shoot out long growth. The angle of growth makes them susceptible to breakage in the winter with heavy snows or freezing rains.)

### HEADING BACK

Heading back involves the shortening of individual stems to remove dead or diseased wood and to restrict the size of the plant. Cuts are made back to the parent stem rather than to the ground and to balance the plant's shape. "Topping" the bush is not recommended, but if the shrub has become unsightly, remove all of the old stems to within five to eight inches of the ground and leave just a few well-spaced new shoots. This is a drastic step that will leave the plant flowerless for a few years, but lilacs are hardy and will grow back as long as there are a few healthy new shoots.

### TRANSPLANTING

Transplanting is done in spring or fall when the plant is dormant. Take care to cut the roots no closer than the drip line of the shrub as lilacs have a root system. It is also important to cut back the plant by one-third when transplanting because, since you are removing its roots, this will not make the plant suffer so much: Less roots, less branches for better chances of quick recovery. Apply either bone meal or a liquid transplanter such as 15-30-15; follow container directions for planting. It is normal for a transplanted lilac to have smaller leaves for a year or two as well as no flowers for two to four years. The plant's roots must be sufficiently developed and all of its other physiological needs must be met before it will flower.

### FERTILIZING

Lilacs prefer a soil pH level of 6 – 7, which is common to soil in the Metro Chicago area. Alkalinity can be measured with a home soil test kit. A tip from the International Lilac Society is that, if you find your soil is too acidic, try spreading fireplace wood ash around the drip line of the bush and you may find it produces bigger and better blossoms. A low nitrogen fertilizer such as 5-10-5 will encourage bloom and not push the foliage too hard. It may be applied to the soil around the base of the plant when the buds begin to swell and expand in the early spring. Broadcast it directly on top of the soil, distributing it evenly around the root zone. Remember that buds are set the previous year, so fertilizer that is applied now will work on this year's leaves but next year's bloom.

### PROPAGATION

The simplest way to acquire true-to-name lilacs is to dig up suckers from the base of an established own-root plant. This is called propagation by division because it involves separating a rooted shoot from the parent plant by simply cutting a segment from it. Use a sharp spade to sever the shoot, taking care to avoid injuring the parent plant. Having severed the shoot from its parent plant, do nothing more for one year. Leaving the shoot in place in the ground this way will help it to develop its own root system before you dig it out to re-locate it. Layering, softwood cuttings, grafting and tissue culture are other methods used to propagate lilacs, all of which involve more advanced procedures than space here permits.

## OVERWINTERING

Lilacs are very hardy. Once established, they don't require ANY special precautions for winter. The roots of a new lilac — balled in burlap or in a pot — however, must be protected. It can be left wrapped in the burlap or left in its pot through winter if well-packed in straw around the very base of the bush. A better overwintering idea for a potted lilac may be to choose a site where you might like to permanently plant it, but for this first year, simply dig the hole and plant pot and all. It is very important that you check the soil a few inches down to determine if it needs watering as it will have a tendency to dry out quicker in the pot than in the ground. The plant will have developed a better root system by the following spring, at which time you will remove it from the pot and plant it in its permanent location.

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